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ABSTRACT

A study of general student performance in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland undertaken in 1975 is described, and efforts toward developing a new system of school-leaving examinations are discussed. The study was designed to assess existing student evaluation instruments, create new evaluation techniques and instruments, promote cooperation between local education authorities and schools, and identify circumstances related to differential student achievement. The results of reading and writing tests and changes in the educational and testing system are explored, especially those occurring in the population being tested since the tests' inception. The resulting recommendations include simplification of the examination system as quickly as possible, without altering the existing standards and targeted ability range, and reduction of the number of regional authorities responsible for syllabuses and examinations. Specific changes were recommended for French and English testing. (MSE)

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Language Testing at about Age 16:
Current Developments in England,
Wales and Northern Ireland,
Robert H. Osborne

Before I begin, may I first make a few remarks about the organisation of education in the United Kingdom and how this affects what I shall be talking about. I hope you'll forgive me if I'm covering ground that you're already familiar with.

Much of the responsibility for education rests with local authorities which are part of the local government structure of town and county councils. But the system is controlled, over all, by central government and Acts of Parliament. The system operating in Scotland is significantly different from that which operates in the rest of the United Kingdom and I shall not be referring to developments there. But what I have to say is relevant not only to England but also to Wales and to a certain extent Northern Ireland as well.

What I have to say is in two parts. First, I shall be talking about a survey of language performance in schools and then I shall outline developments towards a new system of examining to replace the existing GCE 'O' level and CSE examinations. These two projects I see as having, potentially, a great beneficial effect on teaching and will also have an effect on the type and range of language testing at about the age of 16 in the future.

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Language Performance in Schools

In 1975 a unit was set up in the Department of Education and Science - the government's education office for England - to provide information about general levels of performance of children and young people at school and how these change over the years. The unit is called 'The Assessment of Performance Unit' or, more commonly, the A.P.U.

Its terms of reference are:

'to promote the development of methods of assessing and monitoring the achievements of children at school, and to seek to identify the incidence of under-achievement.'

and as a result it has undertaken a research programme which is defined in terms of four specific tasks:

Firstly it has sought to 'identify and appraise existing instruments and methods of assessment' insofar as they may be relevant; secondly it has undertaken 'the creation of new instruments and techniques for assessment'; thirdly, it is carrying out assessment in co-operation with local education authorities and schools; and fourthly it has sought to 'identify significant differences of achievement related to the circumstances in which children learn, including the incidence of under-achievement, and to make the findings available to those concerned with resource allocation within government departments, local education authorities and

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schools.'

Before I go any further I must make it clear that this is seen as a long term project and although reports on language performance at ages 11 and 15 have been published, it is intended that these should be only the first of a series which will span a number of years.1 For 15 year olds the aim is to carry out five national surveys initially and no doubt each will be the subject of a report. And as well as being long term, the project is also very broad in scope and will try to recognise language performance in parts of the curriculum which do not receive the direct impact of language teachers. Maths and Science are being treated in the same way and a certain amount of exploratory work has also been undertaken with regard to aesthetic subjects. One other point; all the monitoring of language performance that has taken place so far has been concerned with English, but monitoring of French, German and Spanish as first foreign languages is planned to begin in 1983. Language monitoring of 15 year olds began in 1979 using assessment procedures that had been developed by a team based at the National Foundation for Educational Research. Of course, national surveys of attainment are not new and it was in fact the NFER that was responsible for surveys of national attainment in reading at the ages of 11 and 15 which were conducted in the period 1948 to 1964. The reading materials developed for the APU surveys are different but it is interesting to note that some of the outcomes of the initial monitoring can be linked to the results of the earlier reading surveys. More of this in a moment.

First some figures to indicate the scale of the survey. A representative national sample of about 9,100 pupils from 378 schools, - state schools, maintained schools and independent schools - were involved in the survey. Approximately 5,900 of the pupils were from schools in England, 1,400 from Wales and 1,800 from Northern Ireland. However, only reading and writing skills were assessed and only seven hundred of the pupils completed tests which linked reading and writing. Of the remainder, 5,300 pupils completed tests in reading and 3,100 completed tests in writing.

The tests in reading were based on eight illustrated booklets varying in content, structure, source, style and purpose. In the main, the pupils had only one booklet to deal with but four additional booklets were produced which contained material from more than one of the other booklets and these were then used with a sub-sample of the pupils. This, as you will have realised, was to ensure that the test items could be scaled, and to help further with this, all the pupils were asked to read one set passage and answer fifteen questions related to it.

The report examines, in great detail, the pupils' responses, with regard to the short story and travel brochure, but the information that has emerged will really only become significant when further surveys have been completed. Of more interest is the fact that nearly a thousand of the pupils who took the reading test also

took one of the earlier national reading tests - National Survey Test 6 - which had been in use since 1955. There was no statistically significant difference between the mean scores obtained in 1970 - 71 and 1979, and the correlation between the 1979 NS6 and APU reading tests was 0.81.

A sub-sample of pupils who took part in the reading survey also completed a questionnaire about their reading preferences and interests. The main outcomes were firstly that boys were significantly less favourably inclined than girls to reading, both in and out of school. Secondly, there was a consistent but low correlation between attitude and attainment in reading. Thirdly, the compulsory study of a narrow range of books in school appeared to encourage a dislike of reading and fourthly, when the results of the survey of eleven year olds is taken into account, the enquiry shows a general decline in enthusiasm towards reading from the age of eleven.

Turning now to the work undertaken with regard to writing, ten booklets were used, each containing a writing task, an editing exercise and an additional writing task that was common to all ten booklets. As with the reading tests, the raw scores were scaled to take account of the relative difficulty of the tests. The weakest writing was analysed and the report says that about one per cent of the pupils 'provided no evidence of an ability to communicate in writing'. About nine per cent of the scripts were 'inadequate' in terms of content and appropriateness of style.

The booklets also contained three short questions on attitudes to writing, which gave approximately sixty per cent of the sample the opportunity to express a certain amount of frustration with routine written work in school. The mean scores of pupils with negative attitudes were significantly lower than those of other groups of pupils and significantly more boys than girls stated dislike of or lack of interest in writing.

These, then, have been the main outcomes of the first part of the investigation, but there are a few other matters that may be of interest. While the individual pupils' results were kept confidential, the team was able to relate them to background variables and as a result have been able to draw the following conclusions: firstly, there was no significant difference between the mean reading scores of girls and boys, but girls obtained a significantly higher writing score than boys and secondly, in England and Wales, pupils in single-sex schools achieved significantly higher scores than those in mixed schools. However, it must be pointed out that there are other factors involved, such as the type of school and the social background of its pupils, which have not been taken fully into account.

As the project continues, it will be possible to derive considerably more information from the results obtained, and the team will also be reporting on listening and speaking skills on which work has been proceeding for some time now. Also, the difference in the mean writing scores for boys and girls will be investigated further and no doubt many other matters too.

Before I turn to the system of examinations, you might be interested to know that the APU plans to deal with performance in a first foreign language by using matrix sampling techniques in order to derive a profile of performance in various aspects of language activity. As with the English project, account will be taken of background variables and if it is clear that some of the preliminary findings require further investigation it is likely that additional test material will be produced.

16+ Examinations

To those of you who are only familiar with a centrally organised system of examinations, I am sure the more I said about the British system, as it now exists, the more confusing it would appear to be. True, nearly all pupils take one of two types of examination, providing certification in individual subjects, before they leave school, the two types being one for higher levels of ability only - the General Certificate of Education - GCE - and one for a very much wider ability range - the Certificate of Secondary Education or CSE, but to go any further will indicate a tremendous diversity in approach and techniques. Nevertheless, I hope you will find some of the information I can give of real interest and in any case it must serve as a back cloth to any presentation of the developments that are currently taking place.

Firstly, then, the General Certificate of Education. There are at present eight GCE examining Boards in England and Wales and you may find that you know the names of at least some of them. (The names are listed later in this paper.)

Each of these defines its own syllabuses and methods of assessment. Some of them have been in existence for over a hundred years and were originally established to help universities to select their entry, a matriculation examination in fact. Nevertheless, they have always relied on comments from school teachers on the suitability of syllabuses and techniques of assessment and have tried to respond to changing needs. As the Oxford Delegacy said in 1857 'An examination would give a definite aim to the school masters, and a great stimulus to the scholars; and would afford an evidence to the public how far the exertions of both had been successful. It was not, however, expected or wished that the University should undertake to prescribe authoritatively any particular course of instruction, or should endeavour in any way to interfere with the system which any schoolmaster might have been pursuring. The University was asked only to test results, not to inquire into methods. The statute accordingly was so framed as to leave a wide discretion to the Delegates in regard to the subjects and the form of the examination, and also in regard to the mode in which the successful candidates should be distinguished or otherwise rewarded, and the Delegates in endeavouring to act in the spirit of the statute considered themselves bound to consult the wishes and requirements of the existing schools, and to interfere with them as little as possible.' In line with

current government policy their examinations are designed for the top twenty per cent of the ability range and largely because of traditional attitudes to such examinations the large majority are externally assessed, in other words, the person marking a candidate's work will not be asked to assess the work of his or her own pupils.

The CSE examination system was set up about fifteen years ago to cater for candidates down to the fortieth per centile. At that time children - young people - were only required to attend school until they were fifteen so the candidature in the early years was quite low. Subsequently the school leaving age was raised to sixteen and entries increased dramatically, the most recent figure for subject entries over the whole country being 3,382,334 for the 1981 examinations.2 This development has, of course, called into question the validity of trying to restrict the range catered for by public examinations. Nevertheless, the present government has shown no inclination to change its policy in this regard.

To administer CSE examinations we currently have thirteen Boards in England and Wales organised on a geographical basis, the names of most of which you may never have heard before. (The names are listed later in this paper.) In 1980, the Middlesex and Metropolitan Examining Boards merged to form the London Regional Examinations Board, and later this year the West Yorkshire & Lindsey Regional Examining Board and the Yorkshire Regional Examinations Board will join to form the Yorkshire & Humberside Regional Examinations Board.

Apart from the size of the ability range catered for, another important difference between the GCE and CSE systems is the extent of teacher control which for CSE is considerable, particularly so for my own Board, the Southern Regional Examinations Board. There is also, in SREB, a large amount of internal assessment - well over 50% - but with other Boards this tends to be rather less.

As with GCE, each CSE Board is responsible for developing its own syllabuses and examinations, and with both systems there is provision for individual schools to develop their own syllabuses but still to receive, after moderation, certification from the Board.

As you will have realised, the result of all this is a very great diversity of syllabuses and methods of assessment, no less so in language than in any other area of the curriculum. As you will see if you refer to 'Modern Languages Examinations at Sixteen Plus' one hundred syllabuses were available in 1979 for board-based examinations in French, German, Italian, Russian and Spanish, and this figure does not include syllabuses developed by individual schools and groups of schools. Cross moderation exercises are carried out regularly, of course, but it has to be admitted that while the system has the advantage of tremendous flexibility, and in the case of the GCE Boards, a certain competitive spirit, it is nevertheless somewhat unwieldy and baffles the uninitiated. In response to a growing amount of pressure from teachers, local government and employers,

particularly the main 'users' of the certificates, the government eventually decided it should do something about it and this, very briefly, is how it happened.

First they agreed to receive recommendations drawn up the Schools Council - a quasi government body, widely representative - recommendations which amounted to this: make sure that as quickly as possible the system of examining is simplified while retaining existing standards (albeit with a new grading structure) and catering for the same range of ability. The principal documents are the original recommendations made by the Schools Council, the report of the Waddell Committee (July 1978)[4] which was asked to investigate the matter and present to the government its own recommendations, and the government response, embodied in the intentions contained in its white paper 'Secondary School Examinations: A Single System at 16 Plus' of October 1978.[5]

In order to achieve a reduction in the number of syllabuses, the government proposed that groups of boards, organised on a geographical basis, co-operate in running the new system of examining. Wales and Northern Ireland already had substantial links between their GCE and CSE Boards but in England the remaining nineteen boards were asked to agree a group structure among themselves and the groups that have emerged are as follows:

NORTHERN GROUP

GCE	CSE
Joint Matriculation Board	Associated Lancashire Schools Examining Board
	North Regional Examinations Board
	North West Regional Examinations Board
	The West Yorkshire & Lindsey Regional Examining Board
	The Yorkshire Regional Examining Board

MIDLAND GROUP

GCE	CSE
Cambridge University Local Examinations Syndicate	East Midland Regional Examinations Board
Oxford & Cambridge Schools Examinations Board	The West Midlands Examinations Board

LONDON & EAST ANGLIA GROUP

GCE	CSE
London University Entrance and School Examinations Council	East Anglian Examinations Board
	London Regional Examining Board

SOUTHERN GROUP

GCE	CSE
Oxford Delegacy of Local Examinations	Southern Regional Examinations Board
Associated Examining Board	South East Regional Examinations Board
	South Western Examinations Board

WALES

GCE	CSE
Welsh Joint Education Committee	Welsh Joint Education Committee

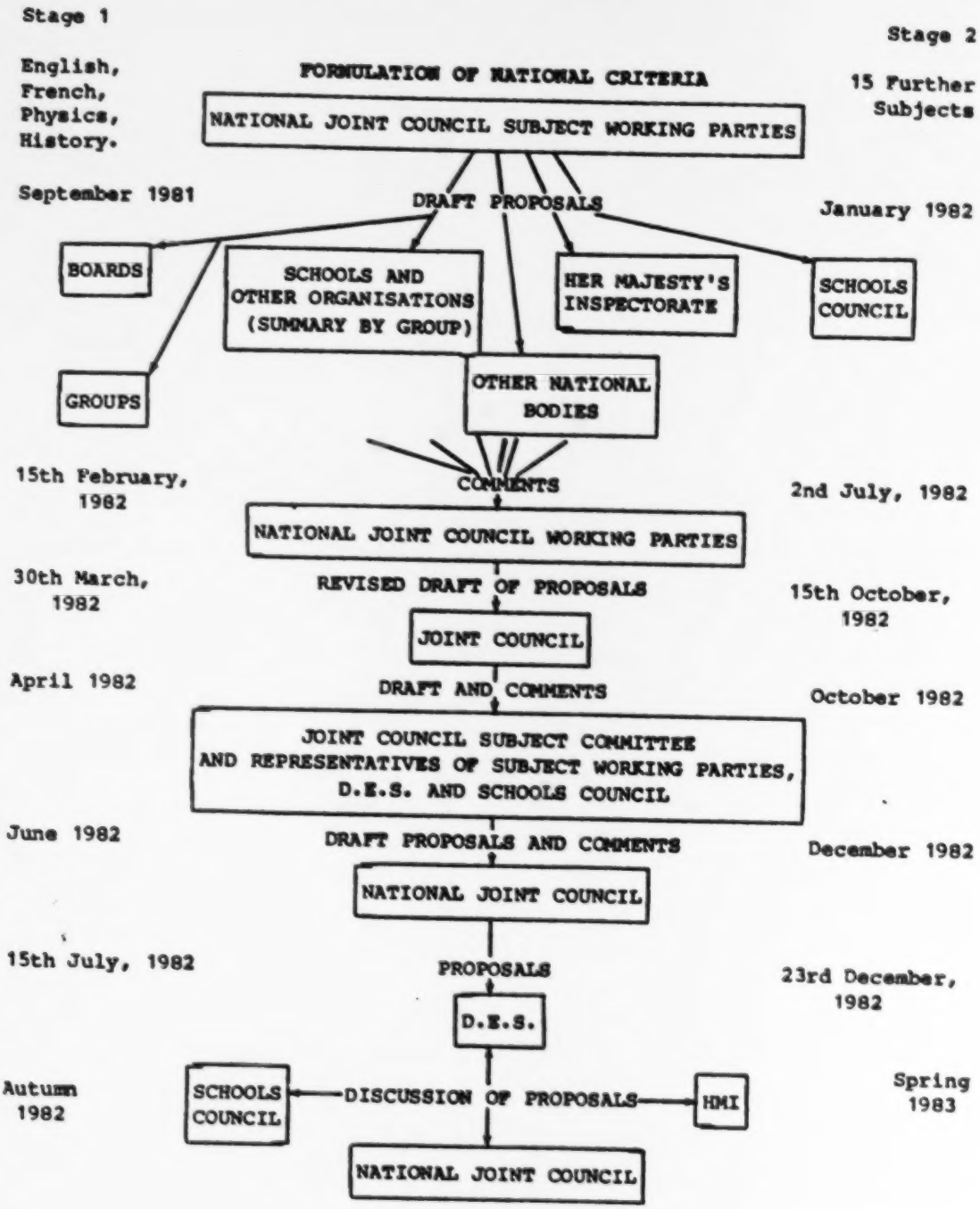
One of the recommendations of the Schools Council had been that "criteria should be established for the acceptance, validation and moderation of syllabus and schemes of assessment." (8th July, 1976)

The Government agreed that syllabuses in subjects important for subsequent stages of education or of vocational relevance have sufficient in common, and are relevant to the needs of subsequent courses of education and employment, to enable the grades awarded to be accepted with confidence by those concerned.

In order to do this it has been necessary for all the Boards to work together and for this purpose a National Joint Council was set up and this council in turn set up subject working parties and has organised a massive consultation exercise, through which it has invited teachers and other interested parties to say what they think of draft proposals. The way in which the development of criteria is being organised is shown in the following diagram:

A SINGLE SYSTEM OF EXAMINING AT 16+

General Certificate of Secondary Education?
Certificate of General Education?



Among the conference papers were the draft national criteria for English and French in the form they went to schools and other organisations. What they represent, in effect, is the extent to which Boards are, so far, prepared to define standards and the way in which examinations will be organised. The working parties have, of late, been considering the responses made by schools and other organisations and making any amendments to their proposals that they feel are necessary. With regard to French, considerable interest is being shown in graded testing and we may soon see substantial developments in this field.

With regard to English, the following points had received a surprising amount of general agreement:

1 Ability Range

The suggestion that the examination should be restricted to the top 60% of the ability range had been universally condemned.

2 Unitary English

With the exception of only three GCE Boards, it had been recommended that examinations in English Language should not be provided and that any examination entitled "English" should include some literature.

3 Orals

With the exception of only three GCE Boards, it was felt that an oral assessment should be compulsory in any examination in English as a mother tongue.

4 Course Work

There was general support for the inclusion of course work as part of any written assessment in English and English Literature.

As you will have seen, there is still a long way to go before any final decisions are taken with regard to the precise way in which the new system is designed and implemented, but I trust that the information that has been presented will help to put into perspective any of the developments that will take place in language testing, in England and Wales, at about the age of 16, over the next 10 or 20 years.

1 *Language Performance in Schools, Secondary Survey Report No. 1* published by Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1982 (ISBN 0 11 270387 9)

2 Minutes of the Examinations Committee, The Schools Council, February, 1982 (SC 82/37)

3 *Modern Languages Examinations at Sixteen Plus, A Critical Analysis* published by the Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research, 1980

4 *School Examinations* published by Her Majesty's Stationery Office, July 1978 (Command 7281-1)

5 *Secondary School Examinations: A Single System at 16 Plus* published by Her Majesty's Stationery Office, October 1978 (Command 7368)